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The Double Cohort and Quality

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**Editor's Note: This paper was written several months in advance of the arrival of the double cohort students on Ontario university campuses.*

Our paper addresses the arrival of Ontario's double cohort on our campuses as of September 2003 and, at the same time, addresses the fact that this surge in enrolments is not a single-year phenomenon. The problems related to teaching larger numbers of students with straitened resources are likely to continue throughout the years of the double cohort's participation as undergraduates – and indeed for the rest of this decade – since participation rates for Ontario's universities are expected to remain high until at least 2010. Hence, our proposals are not meant simply to address the short term (a period of urgency, to be sure), but the medium term as well. How will we manage to maintain quality of instruction and university experience, given vastly greater numbers of students and only moderate increases in capacity?

We are also aware that the pressure on universities to accommodate and meet the needs of an influx of undergraduates has implications for graduate studies. While our observations and recommendations focus primarily on undergraduate needs, it is clear that resources for graduate students (especially given their increased numbers) are likely to be scarcer than ever, even though demands on graduate students to assist with undergraduate education may increase. It will be necessary to ensure that increased teaching demands do not compromise the ability of graduate students to conduct research and to establish research programs at levels necessary for the advancement of their own fledgling careers, in spite of the system's need to respond to intense undergraduate teaching needs for the greater part of this decade.

It is also important to consider the ways in which students learn at universities at the present time. Modes of knowledge acquisition and production have changed in universities over the past decade or so. Even at the undergraduate level, first-year students are typically no longer expected to "absorb" knowledge from their professors, as was predicated by the old lecture ("listen and learn") system. Today students are expected to be active participants in their own learning. Small group work – whether through seminars, labs, or team-based projects – is now the norm, and even neophyte students are expected to generate or produce knowledge at some level rather than simply replicating it, to a far greater extent than in times past. Such knowledge acquisition protocols make certain kinds of efficiencies (such as huge lecture sections and the use of tests rather than essays or projects) less feasible than in the past if the university experience is to remain distinguished from other postsecondary models where other modes of training and education may prevail.

Finally, we are very conscious of the fact that many of our recommendations address academic issues, while other aspects of student life will also be under intense pressure. There will be huge demands made on student services units in our universities over the next half-decade. Registrar's offices, residence life, student financial aid, and student counselling personnel, to mention but a few such units, will be severely pressed in attempting to offer more service to larger numbers of students in greater compressed time periods. Crowding increases stress. Our campuses will be more crowded and, in that

way alone, more stressed than ever for faculty, staff, and students alike over the next few years.

It is with these factors in mind that we proceed with our observations and our recommendations regarding the maintenance of quality in Ontario universities over the double cohort years and beyond.

A GLIMPSE OF THE VERY NEAR FUTURE

Let us imagine that it is September 15, 2003. The students have arrived. Somehow, they have all been housed and registered. Schedules have expanded to include weekends and early mornings. Portables have sprung up. By conscripting retirees, qualified community members, graduate students, and our top senior undergraduates, we've managed to put a teacher in front of every class, and find a leader for every tutorial. What next?

Our most urgent problem is the management of first-year students. We face the largest entering class ever, the highest student-faculty ratios ever, and the biggest space crunch since just after World War II. We also have an entering class with impressive records from secondary school. They deserve the best we can offer.

Yet as we wait for further funding, new construction, and new hiring, we must contend with immediate problems: overcrowding, scarcely adequate computing and studying facilities, and less teaching support per student. If we are not careful, the remoteness of large sections will tend to discourage class attendance, encourage cheating, and generally foster disengagement on the part of our students. Moreover, focusing special attention on first-year students will, we fear, draw needed resources from the upper years. Somehow we need to minimize the deleterious effects on quality of instruction for both incoming and continuing students, and seize whatever new opportunities the situation provides.

Most immediately, however, we must handle the first-year influx. The basic assumption of the authors of this paper is that a quality academic experience for incoming students will depend on four factors:

- Extremely careful class management in terms of organization, scheduling, and testing mechanisms;
- Extraordinary lucidity on the part of instructors regarding our course goals, course requirements, and proscribed activities;
- Active encouragement of engagement and self-responsibility on the part of students; and
- Establishment of help and way-finding mechanisms for students experiencing difficulty.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSURING QUALITY IN UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

1. Revisit Program Goals and Clearly Identify the Competencies Aimed for in Each Discipline

- Departments and faculties must begin to strategize about how best to introduce double cohort students to their first-year courses. Given larger classes, instructors will need to be especially clear about course goals, course expectations, and course standards. Students will need to be alerted to the fact that under these more crowded circumstances it will be very easy to become invisible or lose one's way. Never before have we had to count on students being as self-responsible as they will have to be this year, so we will have to be very clear about telling them what they need to know. Since we may see such students for the most part only *en masse* and in the absence of close supervision, the students themselves will need to be as vigilant as possible about their own grasp of materials and their need to take action at the first sign of confusion or dismay.

- We will also need to examine the overall goals of programs. What is essential to undergraduate education in our fields, and what is desirable without being necessary? We may need to revisit our program requirements, some of which may be historically desirable without being absolutely necessary for entry to graduate or professional programs at this time. Can we permit pressure regarding first-year programming or tight program requirements to lead to the discontinuation of senior major projects, for example, or will there need to be some other trade-off in program requirements in order to sacrifice neither first-year students nor fourth-year majors?
- The pressures of the double cohort will be challenging, but also will constitute an opportunity for rethinking undergraduate studies, particularly in first- and second-year courses. It is unlikely that old patterns or ways of doing things will be adequate. New, interactive ways of learning require that class sizes be limited to sizes in which students can function as learners rather than as consumers of mass "edu-tainment" experiences. Different ways of doing things, such as moving students through modules rather than lock-step courses, or creating different patterns or routes for different kinds of learners, may emerge from the need to rethink what we do and how we do it. Interdisciplinary work, teamwork, and community work are all ways of breaking down rather than "sizing up" classes. The pressure of the times may lead to innovation and new discoveries about ways of ensuring the thinking, participative, and self-responsive studentship that we are likely to endorse as university teachers – even though it was the old way that created us.
- At the same time, it must be recognized that innovation is not without cost, particularly on the part of innovators. Instructional technology support is going to be a huge need as dedicated professors devise new ways of conceptualizing and delivering courses to a new kind of student body. And these dedicated teachers are going to need to be supported with enough release time to make their investment in new teaching methods, programs, and strategies possible – without compromising their research programs. Faculty willing to take on teaching leadership at this time will need to be supported by resource shifts that make teaching development initiatives possible at a time when they are going to be sorely needed.

2. Provide Instruction in the Management of Larger Classes

- Instructional development for faculty is no longer a fad or frill. Many faculty will have to deal with larger classes of younger students than they have ever had to work with before. There will also be greater variability in the students' levels of preparedness and more diversity in terms of the entering student cohort. Recent legislation increasing responsibility for accommodating a wider range of student disabilities must also be factored into the mix.
- There is no doubt that instructors will need to be more media-savvy than in the past, and that some will require basic training in managing the acoustics of large rooms, using microphones, and employing PowerPoint or other classroom technologies that make it possible for students to hear lectures and see visuals despite the larger venues.
- Apart from technology, other classroom management techniques may need to be developed, from facilitating small group discussions within large group settings from time to time, to managing "back-row-buzz" when the back of the class is far from the front, where instructors are usually located.
- It may be advisable to think of installing a "dean of first-year studies," or some similar position, to deal with the unusually large numbers of Year 1 students and to promote strategies for co-operation, resource

sharing, instructional development, and other issues across faculties – at least for a three-year period or so, while Ontario universities acclimatize to the special problems of large numbers of very differently prepared students entering university.

3. Mandate Instructor Attention to Individual Students

- Because classes are going to be larger and less attention will be available to individual students in huge Year I sections, it may be more important than in the past to ensure that there are motivating activities or events related to one's discipline that interested students can participate in outside of class. Although there are discipline-related activities of various kinds for students, they are normally run by student groups and may tend to attract and be dominated by upper-year students. As of September 2003, it will be desirable for Year I faculty to organize some events or activities, especially for first-year students within their departments or faculties, if we are going to make young and crowded students feel at all welcome and "cultivated" as undergraduate students. We will need to encourage faculty to be present at these activities.
- There will have to be mechanisms for smaller group meetings and sessions attached to large lecture classes, if not formally, through required seminars, then in a structured way through optional tutorials or sites for web interaction such as Web CT. Obviously, teaching assistants (TAs) will be doing much of this work; however, instructors will have to make sure that more individualized attention is being paid through established mechanisms or channels, whatever the size of their courses.
- Clearly the pressure on lab and seminar space is going to be enormous. It will be necessary for small group meetings to be scheduled in unorthodox ways. Evenings and weekend meetings may be essential in some courses. A combination of real and virtual meetings (in alternate weeks) may double the scheduling potential for daytime seminars and labs. If this route is taken, instructors and TAs will have to be trained in the management of Web CT or other kinds of virtual meetings to be held in alternate weeks.
- It will be all too easy to think of the double cohort in homogeneous terms. However, given the already-ingrained habit of generalizing about these students – seeing them as an undifferentiated group – diversity issues will become more important than ever. Recognizing diversity, addressing diverse needs, and resisting the temptation to label and collectivize this generation of students will be imperative if the entering classes of 2003 and 2004 are to feel respected as individuals with differing interests, experiences, and needs.

4. Fortify Systems for Training and Supervising TAs

- Because teaching assistants will be assuming a greater proportion of the work of leading discussions and grading assignments, it will be more important than ever to ensure that they are well-prepared and supervised. Too often TAs are expected to sink or swim. They may be trained through university-wide or departmental instructional development workshops. But the more responsibility they have (in terms of their increased proportion of students and student work), and the more TAs that are assigned to a given course, the more attentive the instructor must be in overseeing and regularizing the work of so many "delegatees."

5. Promote Academic Integrity

- Academic cheating is likely to be a huge problem where classes are large and personal attention and supervision from the instructional staff will, of necessity, be diminished. Anti-plagiarism programs such as www.turnitin.com may be essential to a university's maintenance of its own credibility. However, all plagiarism experts agree that, while one avenue is carefully developing a culture of intellectual honesty championed by faculty to whom students respond well, designing assignments that discourage (or make impossible) widespread cheating is the most effective strategy of all.
- Departments will need to come up with strategies on how to discourage and thwart academic cheating. Quality education is monitored education that offers honest rewards for honest work. The worst scenario would be a careless professoriate throwing its hands up in despair and deciding that nothing can be done, given the hordes of students requiring attention. Cheating can be discouraged, but anti-plagiarism tactics have to be thought through, prioritized, and collectively practised.

6. Provide Increased Feedback to Students

- Small tests or diagnostics will probably need to be used in Year 1 more broadly than they have been in the past. Testing or short assignments will alert students to difficulties early and in an ongoing way. We are going to have a large number of inexperienced students – the loss of an extra year of maturation while in high school will show. We will have revised our curricula somewhat, but probably not to the point where the transition will be as smooth as it has been. We will have to help the students know how they are doing before it is too late. In some programs, compulsory remedial sessions after testing points have been shown to be effective.
- Some assignments can be restructured so that students can check and monitor their own progress in the early stages, or at appropriate intervals, within teaching or developmental units of study. Such strategies are known to work best with highly motivated students, but cannot be relied upon for all – realistically, the unmotivated cannot be expected to be converted by heroic efforts on the part of faculty under the new regime, the era of the crowded university campus. If students can be trained to self-test and to self-identify weak areas, tutorials can be mounted for weaker but motivated students at particular points in the unfolding of a course.
- As well, peer mechanisms may need to be instituted in a broader way than in the past when it comes to bringing junior students along. Experienced students can be very helpful to beginning students, and structures through which "buddying" and "coaching" activities take place may be particularly useful under the crowded circumstances we are anticipating. Indeed, peer review within even a first-year class, where students respond to one another's work in useful ways, can be successful, and may be a strategy that we need to develop in our classrooms in the future.

7. Provide "Safety Nets" for Students

- Students are going to need to know, to an unprecedented extent, where to find help and support, whether through office hours attached to courses, online participation mechanisms, or student services. Most academics are not accustomed to alerting students to their school's support system, but this year we will *have* to enable students to find their own way when in need. At the very least, our departmental web sites should include "rescue" pages – ideas about what to do if or when certain things occur.

- Such safety nets must include information about academic assistance and about personal assistance. It is difficult to imagine that students who experience more crowding than in the past will not experience more personal stress as well. We must plan to recognize it and to point students in the right direction as quickly as possible. (The corollary, of course, is that student services cannot be curtailed in times like these. Counselling and other kinds of support will be essential given the deleterious effects of larger student numbers on coping mechanisms.)

8. Make Use of Internet Capabilities

- Students will be looking more and more to the web for information, and it will be natural to try to use it to enhance communication. However, putting course lecture notes on the web will not be desirable if it discourages attendance and encourages detachment from other students and the instructional team. But the web may be an ideal place for supplemental material, the kind of thing one might add to a lecture with a smaller group or might hand out to a small class. Training students to go to the web site for additional materials – for information or strategies that will deepen understanding of the subject matter – may be effective in developing the self-responsible students we must shape through our interventions in the double cohort climate. Online discussions or help sessions and other ways of creating virtual learning spaces may replace or reduce office-hour line-ups.

9. Provide Sufficient Opportunities for Outstanding Students

- The gifted among our students need exciting challenges and attention. In return, they provide leadership, energy, and new ideas. We should resist the temptation to do away with enrichment in order to cope with larger numbers of classes and groups. We may be able to offer enrichment opportunities that also help fulfil our responsibilities, allowing younger students to become involved in teaching, research, and technical support. Opportunities for leadership and peer teaching will likely abound. But it is worrying that, although the number of students capable of developing research skills will increase, the number of faculty to guide their research will not keep pace, nor will the funding available for student research.

10. Maximize the Use of Physical Space

- The success of many of these recommendations depends upon there being space for students to hang out and meet with other students. With the space crunch, imagination will be needed to convert nooks and crannies into meeting spaces for undergraduate scrums of various kinds. Open spaces could be turned into temporary meeting spaces if the university or the department could provide folding chairs and tables that can be easily and quickly assembled and taken down.

11. Address Workload-Related Morale Issues Directly

❑ Making workloads manageable must be a priority if quality is to be delivered in a sustained manner. Faculty will feel increased pressure as teaching demands loom larger in a climate in which research demands have also escalated and cannot be ignored. Strategies for rewarding those willing to take on greater-than-minimal levels of teaching and other kinds of service will be necessary if the system is to accommodate the growing numbers of students for such a sustained period of time.

Staff will also feel enormous pressure, since every additional student will create additional levels of need in terms of administrative and student support services. Ways of supporting staff and creating ways of mutual support and work sharing – as well as the hiring of additional personnel to deal with the influx – will be essential if stress is not to take its toll on those who support the teaching and research enterprise of the university of the future.

CONCLUSION

In the next few years, necessity will make us inventive. The recommendations above suggest directions: focusing on essentials; trying to empower and enable students to take responsibility for the quality of their learning; redeploying faculty, staff, and teaching assistant resources in truly productive ways; and exploiting the labour-saving (rather than labour-escalating) fruits of technology. But it should be remembered that we have already travelled some distance in these directions, and that ingenuity and imagination can take us only so much further. We will be unable to stretch current resources to sufficiently cover the needs of the double cohort and its aftermath, no matter how inventive and dedicated we are. Additional resources will surely be needed – in terms of full funding for incoming students as well as more funding in support of increasing infrastructure needs – if we are to ensure that the measures we take are not simply a matter of desperation in challenging times but a delivery of the best of which our system is capable.

Evaluation, Admissions, and the Quality of Ontario Universities

By Kevin McQuillan (COU Academic Colleague, Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario)

The quality of the programs that Ontario universities offer depends in a very significant way on the quality of the students who are admitted. Ideally, universities will admit those students with the ability, preparation, and motivation to draw full value from the programs in which they will study. However, making decisions about admission into first-entry programs has become increasingly difficult. A growing participation rate, demographic pressure, and changes in the Ontario secondary school system have brought a very substantial increase in the numbers of students hoping to gain admission to university. In addition, the change in the application process, which now allows students an unlimited number of choices on their application form, means institutions across the province are dealing with unprecedented numbers of applications.

At the same time, there are serious concerns about the most basic data that universities rely on in the admissions process: Ontario secondary school grades. One problem is the long-term inflation of grades in the system. In just the period from 1985-86 to 2001-02, the average entering grade of an OAC graduate has risen almost five percentage points, from just over 76% to almost 81%. At some Ontario universities, virtually all first-year students enter with an A average. The Ontario situation is, of course, not unique. The Rosovsky report[1] for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences indicates that grade inflation has occurred at both the high school and university level and in many jurisdictions. The report's analysis also identifies some of the key problems created by this trend. A point the authors emphasize is that inflation in grades, unlike inflation in our economic system, is accompanied by what they term "grade compression." Price inflation may still allow for accurate comparison among items so long as relative prices hold their meaning. But with grading there is a ceiling on how high grades can go, and the result is a loss of ability to distinguish between students whose performance at any point would have merited an A grade, and those who, the in past, would have received a B or a C.

While grade inflation and compression are problems that the education system is struggling with in many settings, universities face an additional problem. Local variation in grading practices casts further doubt on the reliability and validity of the grades applicants present to the universities. Inconsistent grading practices between and within schools may overwhelm what little variance remains among students as a result of the inflation and compression of grades that have occurred. The problem is especially acute for applicants to arts and social sciences programs where the variation in grading practices is further complicated by variation in the set of courses on which the marks are based.

The Rosovsky report convincingly argues that the erosion of grading systems has serious consequences for students and institutions. The major goal of any evaluation system is to provide useful information to both students and instructors about students' knowledge and understanding of a body of material. Students need to know whether they have gained a mastery of a topic sufficient to allow them to succeed in further studies or in a particular career. Institutions need to know students' level of preparation when they enter in order to plan a curriculum, while instructors must be able to assume some common base of knowledge among the students in their classes when they plan their lectures and assignments. When no common base is present, both instructors and students

become frustrated in their efforts to advance learning. Students with a strong foundation in a subject are likely to feel short-changed if a great deal of class time is spent reviewing material they have already mastered. On the other hand, students who have been led to believe they are well prepared for more advanced study face both frustration and failure if their level of understanding does not allow them to grasp new material that is being presented.

What can Ontario universities do to improve the selection process in order to better match students with the opportunities best suited to their ability? All solutions, it must be admitted, have their drawbacks. Grading systems, like all systems of measurement, are imperfect. And predicting academic success is a complicated issue. One of the most careful recent studies, which examined the determinants of students' grades in their first year at the University of California,[2] found that a combination of students' high school grade-point average, score on the SAT I and score on the SAT II explained only 22.3% of the variance in first-year university grades. Nevertheless, with demands for admission outstripping the supply of places in many Ontario university programs, admission officers are faced with determining the best way to select the most qualified students for admission. Several possibilities merit further consideration.

1. The use of standard measurement instruments. The reliance of many American institutions on SAT or ACT scores is well known. The advantage of these tests is that they provide a common barometer for the comparison of students from very different high school programs. The authors of the Rosovsky report, for example, point to the stability in SAT scores over time as a crucial piece of evidence for their conclusion that the rise in grades in the United States likely reflects grade inflation rather than real improvement in student performance. Moreover, the University of California study cited above found that use of scores on the SAT II test, which is an achievement test in specific subject areas rather than an aptitude test, significantly increased the predictability of first-year university grades. Nevertheless, such tests have come under increasing criticism in recent years, and a number of universities have either reduced the weight attached to these scores or, in some cases, discontinued their use. Given the criticisms directed at these tests, it is unlikely that Ontario universities would decide to begin using them as an admission tool, or to attempt to create a Canadian version of such standardized tests. An alternative would be the creation of province-wide tests in certain subject areas. A number of Canadian provinces, including Alberta, British Columbia, and Quebec, have instituted such a system. The province of Alberta now conducts Provincial Diploma Exams in core subjects, including English and Mathematics. Students are required to write at least two diploma examinations and the score on the test is worth 50% of the student's final mark in the course. The introduction of province-wide literacy tests for Grade 10 students may provide the basis for a movement in this direction in Ontario.

2. A second approach is to broaden the base of material on which admissions decisions are made in order to place less weight on grades. This is the strategy followed by most graduate and professional programs and is used to a more limited extent by universities for admission into first-entry programs. Applicants might be asked to submit samples of their written work, letters of recommendation, or evidence of involvement in other academic or extracurricular activities as a supplement to their grades. There are problems with this approach as well. Letters of recommendation have arguably experienced the same type of inflation that has occurred with grades. It is difficult to know in the case of written work whether the

material is entirely the result of the student's own effort. A move toward the consideration of more extensive dossiers by admissions officers would undoubtedly require a significant increase in resources. However, more attention to the admissions process might bring a lower failure rate and lower demand for remedial courses for students struggling to keep up.

3. A third approach would involve making use of information at the level of the school rather than the individual. One might, for instance, evaluate a student's grade not only in an absolute sense but also relative to the average grade in the course. The problem here is that it is impossible to know whether a high average grade reflects a strong class or a lax standard of evaluation. A more promising road is to take account of the track record of schools over time. Some Ontario universities examine the relationship between students' entry averages and their performance in their first year at university. On average, students from some schools experience only a modest decline in grades, while those from other schools experience relatively large drops in grades. Arguably, using this information might offset the disadvantage faced by students from schools with a more rigorous grading policy. On the other hand, excellent students from less rigorous schools would be disadvantaged. The essence of the grade inflation and compression problem is that high grades are assigned to those who would earn them under a more rigorous system, but also to those who would not. A more indirect approach might entail greater sharing of information on the relative performance of high schools among the universities, or publication of these data, which now occurs for province-wide testing in the elementary and secondary schools. Public attention to such information might bring pressure to bear on schools to conform to more reasonable standards of evaluation.

Discussions of admissions criteria inevitably raise concerns about fair treatment. Fairness is an important element of the discussion, but the issue is a complex one. Lax grading standards may appear to involve "giving everyone a chance," but the selective nature of our universities inevitably means that some will be denied admission to the program of their choice. A better approach to this problem would involve shifting the focus of the discussion from an abstract notion of fairness to a concern with building a better fit between student interests and abilities and the programs in which they seek to register. The goal of admissions policies should be to select the students most likely to draw full benefit from study in a particular program. Students who are admitted on the basis of inadequate or inaccurate information run a higher risk of failure, and this has grave consequences for the individual student and the program. As Ontario's universities struggle to deal with questions of quality and to define their place in the field of postsecondary education, the focus should be on refining procedures for admission to allow for the best possible fit between student abilities and program demands.

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[1] Rosovsky, Henry and Hartley, Matthew, *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?* Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2002.

[2] Geiser, Saul with Studley, Roger, *UC and the SAT: Predictive Validity and Differential Impact of the SAT I and SAT II at the University of California*. University of California: Office of the President, 2001.

Reflections on Defining Universities

By Shelagh Towson (COU Academic Colleague, Department of Psychology,University of Windsor) and Alan Sparkes (COU Academic Colleague, Department of Sociology, Nipissing University)

A changing environment surrounds contemporary postsecondary educational institutions. Social, political, economic, and technological forces are creating demands on the modern university that appear to be quite different from previous eras. We will emerge from this current set of debates with a diversified postsecondary landscape. This paper seeks to present what will continue to be unique about universities and a university education.

Two recent books seek to open the debate about universities for a wide audience and to promote discussion about the continued promise of the university. *No Place to Learn* states that universities' "broader purposes are seldom probed thoroughly and critically."[1]

> *More importantly, Canadian universities are remarkably complex organizations. They undertake specialized research that is important for Canada's economic well-being but which is difficult for outsiders to understand and analyze. Universities teach an array of subjects to diverse students. They provide public service that enriches society. For these reasons, universities seem remote and imposing.*[2]

The University: International Expectations believes that "the global environment in which higher education functions today poses complex questions that educational leaders must resolve."[3] Both sets of authors seek to discuss critically a range of issues facing higher education, many of which may be little understood by the general public.

The definition of a university and the adequate communication of that definition to members of the general public becomes both more critical and more problematic with the proliferation of alternate postsecondary educational options including, in the Ontario context, both community colleges and for-profit institutions. The present paper starts with some contrasting definitions of the university, including a draft definition of the university by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). It then explores the extent to which member universities of COU share this definition, and the ways in which this definition is communicated through Ontario university web sites. University definitions are then compared to the public definitions provided by the colleges of applied arts and technology and for-profit universities. Finally, we suggest future directions to ensure a broad understanding of the unique characteristics and contributions of the university.

CONTRASTING DEFINITIONS

James Downey, former President of the University of Waterloo who currently heads the Waterloo Centre for the Advancement of Co-operative Education, has proposed the following two-part definition in which the university's function is defined in terms of teaching and research and its form, vital to the fulfillment of its function, is built on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and collegial governance.

Function:

A university is an institution dedicated to the broadening and deepening of the human intellect, and thus of human understanding. This it does through the media of teaching and research. Teaching is the process by which students are encouraged and shown how to acquire knowledge, to question in a disciplined and connected way what they read and are told, to

gather evidence and assess it analytically, to form judgments (scientific, aesthetic, and ethical), based on fact and logic, and to master the skills requisite to effective expression of knowledge and feeling. Research, which is best done in tandem with teaching, is the process by which facts, concepts, hypotheses, and theories are examined, revised, and built upon for a more complete understanding of the universe, nature, culture, society, and the human mind and body. Research is characterized by discipline-based principles of inquiry, and is always seeking to connect and broaden knowledge.

Form:

More than a thousand years experience has shown that universities achieve their purpose best when they are given the freedom to pursue knowledge no matter where it leads. The twin pillars on which the tradition of free inquiry has been built are academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Academic freedom means the collective right of the academic staff to decide who is to be admitted to programs of study, what the standards of achievement will be, and who will do the teaching. It also means for the individual faculty member the greatest reasonable measure of autonomy in the performance of his or her academic duties. Institutional autonomy means sufficient political and economic independence for the institution to determine what programs of teaching and research it will mount and how it will choose to serve society. At once corporation, collegium, and community, and serving as both servant and critic, a university is perhaps society's most complex and durable institution. In its ideal form it is characterized by the practice of civility among its members and by responsiveness to the needs of the people and the society it seeks to serve.

A unique organizational feature of the university is described above: that the academic staff is involved with all aspects of the operation of the organization. University faculty not only teach and conduct research, but also govern through participation in a variety of committees and the university senate. They regularly rotate hats from frontline work in the classroom or lab, to formulating and monitoring policy, and developing and implementing programs within the organization.

The *Canadian Encyclopedia* (2003) provides a somewhat different definition, ignoring form and defining the Canadian university in terms of five objectives: teaching, training, research, public service, and equalization of opportunity.

> *The contemporary Canadian university is a multipurpose organization striving to achieve a number of objectives simultaneously: teaching, the provision of a 'liberal education' or general education; training, the transmission of expert knowledge required for high-level jobs; research, the creation of knowledge through basic scientific research and scholarship; public service, the provision of practical knowledge and science to society; and equalization of opportunity, the extension of university education to all persons who could possibly benefit from it and the removal of participation barriers to increase the participation of underrepresented groups.*

The differences between these two definitions are instructive. It might be presumed that the Downey definition reflects the way in which the academic community defines itself while the encyclopedia definition comes closer to how the larger community perceives universities.

COUNCIL OF ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES' DEFINITIONS

A 1999 draft definition of a university proposed by the COU Standing Committee on Policy and Planning echoes Downey's definition in a condensed form, making reference to scholarship and academic freedom and focusing on the transmission of knowledge through the integration of research and teaching.

> *A university is an autonomous institution based on traditions of scholarship and academic freedom that fosters the integration of research and learning in an environment dedicated to creative and independent inquiry. It is a community of faculty, students and staff that develops habits*

of mind and analytical skills through a distinctive experience involving the acquisition and transmission of knowledge by communicating, questioning and combining ideas across a range of professions and fields. The learning experience of a university education culminates in a degree that recognizes the graduate's ability to shape the future at the local, national and global level and reflects a commitment to the ongoing renewal of knowledge and skills.

Although the university graduate's ability to "shape the future at the local, national and global level" could be interpreted as a reference to public service, there is no mention of either training for specific careers or for the equalization of opportunity.

Although COU does not appear to have formally adopted this draft definition, the COU constitution provides the following definitional guideline:

COU members are united by...their identity as universities, which includes but is not limited to the following characteristics:

- *an approved, clearly articulated and widely known and accepted mission statement and academic goals that are appropriate to a university and that demonstrate its commitment to:*
  - *i. research, scholarship, academic inquiry and the advancement of knowledge*
  - *ii. based on i. above, teaching and other forms of dissemination of knowledge, in which the delivery of university degree-level programs is the major activity*
  - *iii. service to the community.*

This guideline parallels the draft definition in describing Ontario universities as sharing a commitment to research, scholarship, academic inquiry, the advancement of knowledge and teaching. The explicit commitment to service to the community is not included in the draft definition but is included in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* definition.

ONTARIO UNIVERSITY DEFINITIONS OF MISSION

How do these definitions relate to each Ontario university's definition of itself? Of the 20 Ontario universities, 16 had mission statements accessible through their web sites.[4] In some cases, these mission statements were included as part of the university's opening statement, whereas in other cases they were buried under obscure headings, and in four cases the search for a web-accessible mission statement was unsuccessful. These statements ranged considerably in length, from a few lines to several pages. Considering that perhaps some universities choose to communicate their institutional identity to the general public in ways other than the mission statement, a re-examination of each university's web site indicated that this was sometimes the case. With only a few exceptions, web site visitors were greeted with one or more of a brief opening statement describing the university, a message from the president and/or a mission statement. In some cases, an opening statement and president's message communicated the mission statement more succinctly; in other cases, they focused on and emphasized specific approaches or initiatives that made their university unique. The most successful web sites provided visitors with linked access to all three modes of communication, so that the institution's shared identity with other universities and its unique identity as an institution were clear.

An examination of the 16 available mission statements provides a spectrum of definitions that include components of all definitions above and reveals some commonalities and some significant differences.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the purpose of a mission statement, function was emphasized over form. The tradition of academic freedom was mentioned explicitly by only a few universities. (University of Toronto, for example: "Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom.") Somewhat more surprisingly, the pursuit of knowledge was mentioned specifically

by only a few institutions. ("The mission of York University is the pursuit, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. We test the boundaries and structures of knowledge. We cultivate the critical intellect.")

The centrality of teaching to the university mission was apparent in all mission statements, with some promising "a student-centered learning environment" (Lakehead University) and others providing detailed statements on academic focus and environment and commitments to students. In the case of Brock University, its mission is "to prepare students...by developing a passion for life-long learning and the abilities to think creatively and critically, to communicate clearly."

However, the relative importance given to research in the various mission statements varied considerably. One university's mission statement did not refer to research at all; another referred to research only tangentially. Further, although most universities included statements committing to excellence in teaching and research, only one of the mission statements surveyed made the explicit link between research and learning that is made in both the Downey and COU definitions: "The University of Guelph is determined to put the learner at the centre of all it does, recognizing that research and teaching are intimately linked and that learning is a life-long commitment."

Although the idea of public service was included as an explicit goal only in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* definition, this goal was included in most of the mission statements. Public service included both teaching students the skills necessary to provide this service and the idea that the university as an institution has an obligation to provide "exemplary service...to the community, the nation, and the community of nations" (Queen's University). Some universities also recognized their unique regional public service role (for example, University of Ottawa: "to exercise leadership in the development of teaching, research and professional programs designed specifically for the French-speaking population in Ontario").

One university (University of Ontario Institute of Technology) defined itself explicitly as a "market-driven university" with a mission to respond to "the market-driven needs of employers." This definition could perhaps be interpreted as an extension of the meaning of public service.

Perhaps the most obvious discontinuity between the COU definition of a university and the descriptions provided in individual university mission statements was in the inclusion of statements regarding diversity and equalization of opportunity. Eight of the mission statements surveyed referred to equal opportunity and accessibility, either in passing or in detail. (University of Ottawa: "to continue to be a leader in the promotion of women in all aspects of university life." Lakehead University: "is dedicated to working with Aboriginal peoples in furthering their educational aspirations." Brock University: "to facilitate accessibility for lower-income students, mature students, part-time students, students from visible minority groups, Canadian Native Peoples, international students, students with unrealized potential and students with disabilities.")

Within the Ontario context, facilitating the transition of college students to university could be seen as an accessibility issue. However, only one university (University of Ontario Institute of Technology) included this goal in its mission statement.

Although the emphasis on accessibility was more consistent with the *Canadian Encyclopedia* definition than with the COU definition, the inclusion in the former of a reference to training was definitely not reflected in the universities' mission statements. Although many universities have graduate and professional programs, the word "training" was assiduously avoided.

MISSION OF COLLEGES OF APPLIED ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY

There are 24 Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology offering a range of applied diploma programs, and since 2002 some have begun to advertise for a limited number of degree programs. In addition, there are three colleges offering postsecondary programs in agricultural technology, and one college with programs to train health care professionals.[3]

Colleges, like universities, also differ in how they describe themselves. Statements vary considerably in length and description. The most frequent theme is related to career success and jobs. (Seneca College: "we provide career-related education that prepares our students for the global economy." Canadore College: "our graduates get jobs.")

A second theme focuses on intrinsic benefits of education, most often expressed as personal development. (Centennia College: "personal development…improvement." Sir Sandford Fleming College: "personal growth." Loyalist College recognizes the tension between the first two categories with their phrase "…personal and academic development, not just career development." St. Clair College has a comprehensive statement on issues of personal growth that also includes a focus on employment: "Students develop knowledge, skills, and values to enhance their quality of life, and ability to acquire meaningful employment and promote their community involvement.")

These are followed by statements asserting the quality or excellence of programs, teaching, or the overall college experience. (Durham College: "leader in higher education." Confederation College: "provide excellent, accessible, learner-centered education." Niagara College: "providing outstanding applied education and training for a changing world." Humber College: "higher standards of teaching and learning." Collège Boréal: "offre des programs et des services de qualité, flexibles et adaptés aux réalities de la société d'aujourd'hui.")

A fourth theme describes skills and technology training, and a hands-on experience. The word "applied" is often used in relation to education, experience, or training.

Reflecting the increasing partnerships with universities, the next grouping describes academic preparation or the potential for university transfer from college programs. However, there were no mission statements illustrating the "new" college degrees. (Loyalist College: "77 university transfer agreements…begin at Loyalist and finish with a degree." Cambrian College: "collaborative programs with universities…nursing." Centennial College: "engage in academic debate with open minds in an atmosphere of mutual respect.")

The final two themes focus on faculty growth through continued learning and opportunities for applied research, and the responsibility of the college to foster life-long learning.

MISSION OF FOR-PROFIT UNIVERSITIES

Information from seven private sector colleges and universities was examined. Descriptions are brief and to the point. Any statement of the mission of the business was often mixed in with program and course descriptions, the virtues of the faculty (expert experience; highly skilled professionals; and hands-on teaching), and outcome measures such as job placement or career advancement. Rather than mission, the preferred word is "vision."

Almost all web summaries used the word training to describe their function (expert training, excellence in the private-sector training and role-focused training). A second theme relates to career development (prepare for careers and technology-based career education specialized in the information technology field).

Hands-on education was also stressed; as one university puts it, their programs "apply directly to real-life challenges and problems that students encounter." (Jones International University)

CONCLUSIONS

Ontario universities need to attend to how they communicate their mission and identity to members of both the university and larger community. The COU Constitution suggests that each university's mission statement be "widely known and approved." Even if this statement is narrowly interpreted to refer to the level of knowledge and approval within the university community, it is our sense that, for many institutions, the mission statement is another forgotten document. If mission statements are a fad whose time has passed, then university communities should not devote time and energy to their formulation and periodic revision. If they have the potential to serve a more useful function, then the university mission statement should play a more central role in internal communications. How many universities include the mission statement in the packet of orientation materials given to new faculty? How many universities use it as a blueprint for the evaluation of suggested or existing initiatives?

With regard to the larger community, university web sites are increasingly the portals used by students and their parents to see information about the institution. Web site visitors should leave with a sense, first, of what a university education means and, second, with an understanding of the characteristics that make that university unique. While mission statements may not be the best or only way to communicate these two messages, the most effective web sites surveyed were those that used a combination of delivery formats. However, it would be advisable for every university to check its web site to ensure that these messages are "getting through" rather than being lost in the maze of course and program schedules.

Ontario universities presumably share some qualities with each other that are not shared with colleges and private universities, and these qualities should be emphasized. On the other hand, the crafting of a "one size fits all" message is neither feasible nor desirable. For universities that serve regional needs, for example, one of the areas in which their mission statements were strongest was in describing the unique contributions that their institutions made to their particular constituencies.

It is possible that the COU and its member universities may have to rethink its definition of the university, not only in ways that make universities distinct from and competitive with colleges and for-profit universities, but also in ways that distinguish it from universities in past centuries. One source of this rethinking exercise may be in the "slippage" from the COU definitional guideline that was apparent in many of the member university mission statements. As a first example, it was striking that so few of these mission statements asserted the necessary connection between research and teaching that has long been a university article of faith. It is not necessary to subscribe wholeheartedly to the Pocklington and Tupper arguments against this long-held belief in order to suggest that it should be subject to critical examination.

As a second example, many of the individual university mission statements mentioned the importance of encouraging diversity and increasing accessibility. While the notion of the university as a place of learning only for society's elite may be outmoded, it is interesting that the positive assertion of diversity and accessibility as core values of the university is not included explicitly in the COU definition.

Does the university reflect the social mores of its times, hold out against them, or seek to change them? Perhaps the definition of Ontario's universities should more closely reflect Warren Bryan Martin's rationale for the contemporary university:

> *The best rationale for the type of university most needed now is not that it is a centre of basic research and sound scholarship, though it is; nor that it is the place where professional skills are taught and careers launched, though those things happen there; nor that it brings general education, socialization and preparation for citizenship to otherwise benighted students, though it does provide these answers. The best rationale for the university is that it is the place where the most substantial political, economic, and social issues receive sustained and disciplined attention, where contending theologies and methodologies meet, and where prospects are best for the emergence of appropriate responses to these enduring challenges.*[3]

1 Pocklington, Tom and Tupper, Allan, *No Place to Learn: Why Universities Aren't Working*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002, p. 3.

2 Ibid, p. 4.

3 Alexander, F. King and Alexander, Kern, *The University: International Expectations*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2002, p. ix.

4 Internet links to Ontario's public universities can be found at www.edu.on.ca/eng/general/list/univers.html

5 Internet links to each college can be found at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/list/college.html

6 Martin, Warren Bryan cited in Cochrane, W.A., *Society's expectations: Staying near the customer*, 1986, p. 43. (Also cited in W.A.W. Neilson and C. Gaffield [eds.], *Universities in Crisis: A Medieval Institution in the Twenty-First Century*, Montreal, Quebec: The Institute for Research on Public Policy.).

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